

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 8 | Issue 2

Article 6

---

4-1-1991

## Theology and the Necessity of Natures

W.S. Anglin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Anglin, W.S. (1991) "Theology and the Necessity of Natures," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol8/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# THEOLOGY AND THE NECESSITY OF NATURES

W. S. Anglin

In this paper we give a definition of a 'nature' which (1) captures the idea that a nature is a kind of constant in the midst of change; (2) does *not* sanction the inference of the conclusion 'Christ has to be human' from the premiss 'Christ has human nature'; (3) enables us to defend the logical coherence of certain theological claims; and (4) accords with many of our pre-analytic intuitions about 'natures.'

Each of the following theological claims involves the concept of a 'nature.'

1. It is possible for something to have two natures: human and divine.
2. The Word has the divine nature essentially but human nature accidentally.
3. It is not possible for a non-divine human to acquire the divine nature.
4. Non-divine humans who become Christians are given the higher nature of the 'spiritual man.'<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I offer an analysis of a 'nature' and I use this analysis to defend the above claims against the charge of logical incoherence.

## I

A nature is a property or set of properties which is very important for the individual whose nature it is. Indeed, one might easily think that a nature is an essential property in the sense that the proposition

s has nature H

implies the proposition

Necessarily, Hs.

If this were true, the fact that the Word of God assumed human nature would imply that he is human in every possible world.<sup>2</sup> However, there are possible worlds in which there are no human beings, possible worlds in which there is no need for an incarnation, and possible worlds in which, although there is a need for an incarnation, God simply chooses to express his compassion in some other way.

Quite apart from theological concerns, there are good reasons for rejecting the idea that a nature is an essential property. In this section we consider two



such reasons. In the next section we offer a positive account of what it is to be a 'nature.'

One reason for rejecting the idea that a nature is an essential property is that we often use the word 'nature' to refer to a psychological orientation which, although it is an enduring and important part of a person, is not essential to his being. We might agree that someone is an introvert 'by nature' but we would not hold a funeral if he became an extravert. Aristotle reminds us that it is 'easier to change a habit than to change one's nature' but he nonetheless envisages the possibility of changing one's nature.<sup>3</sup>

A second reason for rejecting the idea that a nature is an essential property is that the universe is not as neat as our conceptual system. The nature of a thing has to do with what it is like in nature. However, whereas a system of essential properties is perfectly regular and static, nature is not.

Consider the following: a) crows are easy to distinguish from their background environment; b) crows do not change a great deal during their adult life; c) crows give birth only to crows. If these three statements were false, I doubt we would even have a concept of 'crow.' That there are crows and that it makes sense to talk about their nature is bound up with the fact that, at least in one possible world, nature works in a regular and recurring manner to produce the mobile objects which are crows. However, nature need not (and does not) work in a *perfectly* regular and recurring manner to do this. The fact that crows have a certain nature is not undermined by some infrequent exceptions to nature's uniformity. For example, even if, due to a mutation, a crow occasionally begets something that is not crow-like, we can still talk about 'normal' crows and their nature.

A nature is something which characterises or determines how the thing whose nature it is normally works, grows and so on but it is not essential to that thing. Suppose we have a robin called Jennifer. Suppose that, perhaps thanks to some quantum mechanical freak, Jennifer gradually turns into a crow and then back into a robin. In her final robin stage she remembers many things she learnt in both her previous stages. The change here is drastic but not so drastic as to force us to conclude that Jennifer has ceased to exist. Such a bird is highly unlikely but not even nomologically impossible. Moreover, she has for a while the nature of a crow without being a crow necessarily.

As another counterexample to the thesis that if something has a nature then it is necessary that it have that nature, consider the possibility of a rosebush which loses its thorns and begins to grow tomatoes—while still bearing roses. The resulting hybrid is such that it qualifies both as a rosebush and as a tomato plant. It might have remained as a mere rosebush but it is now also a tomato plant. Thus it has the nature of a tomato plant without being a tomato plant essentially.

One might object to this example that, at the molecular level, my hybrid

rosebush-tomato plant is really neither. How can it have the genetic information of a tomato plant if it is growing roses? How can it have the genetic information of a rosebush if it lacks thorns?

My reply to this objection is that I am not committed to a program of explicating 'natures' in terms of scientific 'essences.' I do not deny that such a program would be worthwhile but, at least in this paper, I am engaged not in a botany project but in a logical analysis of ordinary language concepts. On this level, the word 'rosebush' applies to plants which, say, bear roses. It is in this sense that I claim that it is logically possible that something be both a rosebush and a tomato plant.

Let me try to make my position clearer in terms of an example from George Seddon's article "Logical Possibility."<sup>4</sup> Seddon dislikes the idea that it is logically possible that an iron bar float in water. What he means is that iron and water, having by definition certain atomic structures, have certain specific gravities, and that of iron is greater than that of water. Given the 'nature' of iron and water at the atomic level, it is a logical consequence that iron does not float in water.

I do not take this approach to 'logical possibility.' I take something to be logically possible if it is broadly logically possible in the sense given in Plantinga's book *The Nature of Necessity*. On this view it is logically possible for a bar of iron to float on water. For the protons in the iron might possibly have a lower mass than the protons in water. Or the contact of iron and water might possibly produce, via a fifth fundamental force, a kind of magnetic field which would all but raise the iron on its own, leaving, however, a little work for the buoyant force of the water to do, so that we can really say that the iron is 'floating.' Seddon is presupposing that the basic structure of matter as we know it is a fixed given. But it is broadly logically possible that, say, not all protons have the same mass. Conceived in my fashion, rather than in a way that is tied to the actual physics of the world, logical possibilities cover a wide territory. In particular, it is logically possible that a plant be a rosebush and also a tomato plant. This hybrid might have a chemistry very different from any that could be found in this universe but it would still fall under our ordinary language concepts of 'rosebush' and 'tomato plant.' Regardless of how a botanist would classify it, it would instantiate properties like 'having jagged leaves,' 'bearing roses on thin stems' and so on, and thus on an ordinary dictionary definition of 'rosebush,' it would count as a rosebush. Similarly, it would count as a tomato plant.

Note, moreover, that I am not saying that this plant has some hybrid nature—as if the two one-place predicates 'being a rosebush' and 'being a tomato plant' could somehow mix together in a Platonic heaven. My plant is a hybrid not because it instantiates some hybrid nature but because it instantiates two distinct natures. When I say that a book is both blue and heavy, I

do not mean to imply that it possesses some confused property of blue-heaviness. I mean simply that it is blue, and also heavy. Similarly, when I say that a plant is both a rosebush and a tomato plant, I mean only that it is a rosebush, and also a tomato plant. This point is important for what follows because I shall compare Christ to this rosebush-tomato plant, and I do not want the reader to think that my comparison implies that he does not have two distinct natures. When I say that Christ is a divine human, I mean simply that he has the property of being human, and also the property of being divine. I do not mean that he has a single property which is somehow a compromise between these two properties. I think that Christ is a 'hybrid' of man and God not in the sense that there is some hybrid nature which he instantiates but in the sense, simply, that he possesses the property of being human and also the property of being divine.

## II

When we say that *x* partakes of human nature, we do not want to say that *x* is human in every possible world in which it exists. However, we do want to say that normally *x* will remain human in any possible world that might be described as probable. We want to say something like this: if *x* changed into something not human then, probably, *x* would no longer exist. These considerations suggest the following definition of a 'nature.'

Let *H* be a property such that it makes sense to talk of a substance *x* having that property at a time *t*. In particular, *H* is not to have the form 'being-*P*-at-time-*t*.' For example, *H* is not to be a property like 'being human in 1989.' For it would be redundant to talk of someone having that property in, say, 1990. 'Being human in 1989' is what one might call a timelessly possessed property. These I wish to rule out.

Suppose, moreover, that it is not highly improbable that an existing object have the property of being *H*, and not highly improbable that an existing object have the property of not being *H*. (I do not think that non-existent objects can have properties but I include the word 'existing' in case the reader does.) For example, *H* is not to be a property like 'existing' or 'never having been blown up by an atomic bomb.' As another example, *H* is not to be the property of 'not having suffered an accident which normally causes the annihilation of its victims.' For it is highly improbable that an existing object have the property of not being *H*.

Given these constraints, we say that

*H* is a nature  
if and only if

for every thing *x* (allowing, however, one or two exceptions), if *x* has *H* just before a time *t* then the conditional probability of

x continues to exist after t

on

x ceases at t to have H (but does not cease to have any other property whose loss is not entailed by the loss of H)

is very low (i.e., is 0 or only very slightly greater than 0).

For example, 'canine' is a nature because it is highly improbable that any dog survive the loss of this property. On the other hand, 'being a French speaker' is not a nature because it is highly *probable* that a French speaker survive the loss of his ability to speak French. Forgetting a language does not cause annihilation.

The above definition is long, and so I offer what I take to be an equivalent but shorter version:

H is a nature

if and only if

it is highly improbable that something still exist if it is no longer H.

Note that in the shorter version, the improbability is compatible with there being one or two entities that will very probably survive the loss of a nature H. One or two exceptions will not distort the probability distribution. This point is important because 'human' is a nature, and I want to say that, whether or not he ceases to be human, the Word of God will certainly continue to exist.

At this point the reader may wonder why I need to bring in probability. If I am going to make an exception for the Word of God, why do I not just give some very simple definition of a 'nature'? For if it turns out that Christ's being human leads to some awkward consequence on this definition, I need only say that Christ is an exception.

To this I reply that I wish to give not just any facile definition of 'nature' but one that has some logical weight. And I believe that 'natures' really are tied to probabilities. Second, an exception is quite a natural thing to have if you are dealing with probabilities. If you do not have a probabilistic situation, however, an exception will seem *ad hoc*. Third, in section VI, I wish to talk about the 'spiritual nature' of the saints, and I cannot plausibly make stark exceptions for all of them.

Note that the definition does not apply to timelessly possessed properties like 'being an even number.' We do not say that 16 is even at three o'clock. For our purposes, this does not matter. By means of suitable complications, we could extend the definition to cover the case of mathematical properties and any other timelessly possessed properties.<sup>5</sup> However, this extrapolation would not help us in the defence of the logical coherence of the four theological claims. As far as God is concerned, whether he exists timelessly or

not, we shall assume that he relates to time in such a way that it makes sense to say things like

God is at all times omnipotent

or

God will still be omnipotent tomorrow morning.

We shall also assume that if it makes sense in the first place to say that God is human then it also makes sense to say that

God did not have a human nature in 20 BC but he did have a human nature in 20 AD.

There are no doubt other ways than mine of defining a 'nature.' For example, one might wish to be more 'scientific' and relate 'natures' more closely to the latest theories of matter. In any case, the definition I have offered can be recommended for the following four reasons: (1) it captures the idea that a nature is a kind of constant in the midst of change; (2) it does not sanction the inference of the conclusion 'x has to be H' from the premiss 'x has nature H'; (3) it enables us to defend the logical coherence of the four theological claims against certain objections; and (4) it accords with many of our pre-analytic intuitions about natures. In the next section we shall tackle the theology. In this section we give some examples to show that our definition does indeed function in a 'reasonable' manner.

1. H = being a human being. It is most improbable that Socrates (or any other ordinary human) change into something non-human without ceasing to exist. Thus being a human is a nature.

Note that on a Pythagorean view, it often happens that the same entity is first a man, then a fish, then a bean, and then a man again. This, precisely, is a view which I take to be as highly improbable as the alleged events themselves. Indeed, I think it logically incoherent that a person become a bean without ceasing to exist.

2. H = being a non-human. 'Being a human' is a nature because it marks human beings off from the rest of reality in a way that is very important to their identity. There is, as it were, a dangerously high wall between the human and the non-human, and any human being crossing over it puts his very existence at risk. The same wall, it seems, would prevent a non-human entity from easily acquiring human nature. Indeed, the definition does imply that 'being a non-human' is also a nature.

Against this view, one might raise the following point. Let x be some biological material capable of joining together to form a human being. Since it is not improbable that x survive the change from being a non-human to being a human, the definition implies that being non-human is not a nature.

To this I reply that a human being is not a human body, and a human body

is not the biological material of which it was made. Thus being a non-human really is a nature.

3. H = being brown. This is not a nature according to the definition because an object picked at random may very well survive the change from being brown to being non-brown.

4. H = being an introvert. If we assume that being an introvert is a fixed psychological disposition much more basic to a person's identity than, say, his racial characteristics, then it does follow that this is a nature, and it is literally true that some people are introverts 'by nature.' However, if it is logically possible that, say, Martians regularly fluctuate between being introverted and being extraverted, then H is not a nature. However, Martians or not, we can at least say that the property of being a *human* introvert is most likely a nature.

5. H = being a sexy human. A sexy human being will normally cease to be sexy with old age. Thus, on the definition, being a sexy human is not a nature.

6. H = being divine. If a divine being (i.e. Yahweh) somehow ceased to be divine then he would also cease to exist. It just could not be true that some non-divine being used to be God but is now a mere creature. Hence being divine is a nature.

7. H = being a submarine. If a submarine is gradually transformed into a truck, does the original vehicle cease to exist? Should the owner say, 'I used to have a submarine but now I have a truck'? Should he say, 'my submarine is now a truck'? I am not sure. Whether 'being a submarine' is a nature or not is a moot point and, happily, this is reflected in the definition. Neither by an appeal to common sense, nor by an appeal to the definition, can we decide whether 'being a submarine' is a nature.

We may conclude from the above examples that in many cases our definition of a nature fits with our pre-analytic notion of a nature.

### III

In this section we consider the first of the four theological claims, namely, the claim that

It is possible for a substance to have two natures: human and divine.

Being human and being divine are both natures in our sense. Moreover, there is nothing to prevent an object from having two natures: Socrates has the nature of a human being and also the nature of a living being. The question is therefore simply whether, at one and the same time, the same individual can be both human and divine. Since this question is not directly related to the topic of natures, we shall just offer one or two comments on it.

If one supposes that all human beings exist contingently, or that no divine



being has a body, then nothing is at the same time both human and divine. However, it is not necessary to make these suppositions: no dictionary gives 'contingent' as one of the defining properties of 'human,' and many religions hold that a God can have a body. If we take seriously the fact that God made man in his own image, we should not balk at the idea that one can give reasonable definitions of 'human' and 'divine' in such a way that these two properties are compatible. For example, one might define a divine being as a noncontingent person who has the power knowingly to create or destroy any contingent object, and one might define a human being as a rational life-form with such-and-such a basic appearance. Assuming that it is logically possible that there be a divine being in the above sense, it does not seem impossible that he be able to interact with a human mind and body in such a way as to be himself human.

There are, of course, some difficulties. Does a person who is both divine and human think like God or like a human being? For example, is he able to solve mathematical problems far beyond the limits of human intelligence? One answer to this question is that God can somehow limit his intelligence for awhile. Another answer is that there is no limit on human intelligence. A third answer is that the divine human has two minds: his divine mind knows all about his human mind but his human mind has only limited access to his divine mind. (Here one thinks of psychoanalytic studies done on persons with more than one stream of consciousness.) A fourth answer to the question is that a divine human should always be seen either 'as divine' or 'as human.' Every assertion about such a person should be interpreted to include a qualifier of the form 'in his divine nature' or 'in his human nature.' For example, the assertion

Jesus could solve advanced calculus problems

should be interpreted to mean either

Jesus, in his human nature, could solve advanced calculus problems

or

Jesus, in his divine nature, could solve advanced calculus problems.

On the first interpretation, the assertion is false, since an ordinary man living in first century Palestine could not solve advanced calculus problems. On the second interpretation, however, the assertion is true, since the Word of God is omniscient.

There are also problems with the body of a divine human. Can a divine human run at the rate of 1000 kilometers an hour? Can he build a house in 5 seconds? Perhaps we should say that, in his divine nature, Jesus could have built a house in 5 seconds. But then it sounds odd to talk about Jesus doing a purely human activity 'in his divine nature.'

Another difficulty is that it somehow sounds wrong to say that God is a human being. Does this 'wrongness' indicate that there really is an underlying logical incoherence? Here, I think not. Here, I think it is just a matter of linguistic convention. Christians, at any rate, seem to understand the word 'God' differently, depending on whether it is a subject or a predicate. When Christians use 'God' as the subject of a sentence, they think of that word as referring to the invisible Trinity, and they therefore do not want to follow that subject with any predicate which somehow clashes with that notion. However, when they use the word 'God' in a predicate, they are sometimes thinking of God only in the vague sense of a divine being. For example, Christians say that the Holy Spirit is God but they do not say that God is the Holy Spirit. For in the subject position 'God' means 'the invisible Trinity' and it is not true (on the Christian view) that the whole Trinity is the Holy Spirit. I claim, then, that the only reason that it sounds wrong to say that God is a human being is that this may be understood to mean that the invisible Trinity is a human being. Compare the statements

God clung to Mary's neck

and

Mary held God in her arms.

The first might well sound a little awkward to a Christian but not so much the second. The awkwardness in the first case is not, however, due to anything unsound in the doctrine of the Incarnation but rather to the fact that we tend to interpret the first statement in the following rather oxymoronic fashion:

The invisible Trinity clung to Mary's neck.

For more on the commensurability of the divine and human natures, the reader may wish to consult T. V. Morris's *The Logic of God Incarnate* and the fourth volume of Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles*.<sup>6</sup>

#### IV

The second theological claim is that

The Word has the divine nature essentially but human nature accidentally.

The traditional Christian teaching is that God's becoming human was a free and supererogatory deed. In some possible worlds, therefore, God is not a human being. Although God is and has to be divine, he is not necessarily human, and thus, in this sense, we may say that he has human nature 'accidentally.'

Since being non-human is a nature, we may deduce from our definition that the Incarnation is an improbable event. We live in a strange and wonderful possible world. Like the tomato plant-rosebush, Jesus of Nazareth is a most

unusual object. Of course, this is merely part of what we mean when we say that Christmas is a miracle. In a more 'normal' possible world, God leaves humanity to suffer the natural consequences of sin. In the actual universe, however, God intervenes, giving us mercy we do not deserve, mercy which upsets the normal pattern of justice. What God has done is amazingly generous. It is for this reason that he deserves special thanks and praise for coming to save us.<sup>7</sup>

## V

The third claim is that

It is not possible for a non-divine human to acquire the divine nature.

One might think that this claim is inconsistent with the previous claim that something can, at the same time, be both human and divine. In this section, we explain how the two claims are not inconsistent.

A number of mystics, including the author of the Second Letter of Peter, suggest that an ordinary human being could become divine.<sup>8</sup> If we take the above definition of 'divine,' however, it follows that no contingent being can become God. For according to the above definition, every divine being is noncontingent. Thus if *x* exists and is divine then *x* exists in all possible worlds. Hence it is not the case that in some possible worlds *x* exists whereas in other possible worlds *x* does not exist. Hence *x* is at no time contingent. If, then, non-divine humans are contingent, they cannot acquire the divine nature. Scripture verses about our 'sharing the divine nature' are thus best interpreted to mean that we shall become, not divine, but much more like God. We discuss this possibility in section VI.

There are, no doubt, other definitions of 'human' and 'divine' according to which the transition from merely human to divine is possible. What makes my definitions interesting, precisely, is that, while allowing incarnations of gods, they exclude apotheoses of mere humans. With my definitions we have the traditional Christian view that, although the Word became flesh, there will always be an unbridgeable gap between ordinary humans and the divine human called 'Jesus.' The finite is nothing in comparison with the infinite.

## VI

The fourth theological claim is that

Non-divine humans who become Christians are given the higher nature of the 'spiritual man'.

As Paul writes in the fourth chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians:

You must be made new in mind and spirit, and put on the new nature of God's creating, which shows itself in the just and devout life called for by the truth.

One could take this as being purely metaphorical but for Paul it has some important consequences which suggest that he took it literally. For one thing, the new spiritual person is free from the old law: he or she is bound only by a new and higher code of conduct. Paul even goes so far as to tell Titus that

To the pure all things are pure.<sup>9</sup>

For another thing, it is quite in line with Paul's thinking to hold that Christians are an improbable hybrid. When they get to heaven, they will still be human but they will also be extremely different from the way they are now.<sup>10</sup> Because of this, it may not be such a bad exegesis to take Paul as really meaning that Christians acquire a new nature. The improbable event of the Incarnation results in the improbable event of a saint becoming more than merely human.

What is this new nature like? Its main features, I would say, are an increased capacity for knowledge and love. The soul is 'illuminated.' Thus it is that 'the spiritual person can assess the value of everything.'<sup>11</sup> Moreover, on account of this enriched ability to know and to love, the spiritual person can more easily take a God's eye view of ethical situations and judge them in a way that, in some cases, permits an action at variance with the dictates of natural law ethics for ordinary human beings. Thus 'to the pure all things are pure.'

It does seem paradoxical that the same individual could both be subject to the morality of, say, natural law for humans, and also transcend that morality in Christ. Such paradoxes are the meat of good books on the Christian faith. Moreover, paradox is not contradiction, and no one has conclusively demonstrated that Abraham acted immorally when, in obedience to a higher law, he set out to kill his innocent son Isaac.

Because natures are not essences, there are possible worlds in which Saint Peter remained a sinner. Nonetheless, in the actual universe, his new spiritual life became the characteristic mark of the man, the meaning if not the definition of his life. Conversely, in the case of apostasy, we not unnaturally say that the ex-Christian has lost his identity, that he has become a different person. This is not literally true but there is truth enough in it to suggest that what he has lost is properly called his Christian nature.<sup>12</sup>

*Magill University*

## NOTES

1. Romans 8:1-17; Ephesians 4:22-24.
2. I assume that the Word (the Second Person of the Trinity) exists in every possible world.
3. Nichomachean Ethics 1152a30 and Rhetoric 1369b1-2.

4. George Seddon, "Logical Possibility," *Mind*, 81 (1972), 481-94.

5. We might say that all mathematical properties (e.g. being even) were natures. We might say that 'being a seraph' was a nature because if an angel *were* in time it probably *would not* survive the change from being a seraph to being a non-seraph.

6. *The Logic of God Incarnate* was published in Ithaca in 1986 by the Cornell University Press.

7. Note that Jesus still is human (with a body) and will always be human.

8. 2 Peter 1:4.

9. Titus 1:15. For more of the same, see Romans 8:1-13; 1 Corinthians 2:14-16; 6:7; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-11.

10. 1 Corinthians 15:35-57.

11. 1 Corinthians 2:15.

12. I wish to thank Eleonore Stump, the editor and the referees for many useful comments.